

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord – January 10, 2016

“Bath and Barbecue”

Scripture: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Good ol' John the Baptist. You know he just can't help himself. He's a fire and brimstone preacher through and through. He can't get the word out about Jesus and baptism without throwing in the threat of fire and eternal damnation. But I, for one, am a lot more interested in the bath than in the barbecue.

I figure that Jesus must have been a bit of an enigma to John. John was looking for that savior who was ---pardon my lack of couth, but--- a savior who was going to kick butt and take names. But what he got was this all-forgiving sort of level, loving guy. Oh, it isn't that Jesus couldn't throw down with the rest of them when there was a good argument to be had, but when push came to shove, Jesus reserved the worst punishment for himself and not for the people. When the time came, he gave himself up to a death on the cross, forgiving even those who most directly put him there, doing his best to keep them *out* of the fire rather than to throw them into it. I bet that isn't at all what John would have expected had he lived long enough to see it happen. Which is why I am glad we have cleared up this question about just who is the Messiah. Because I'd rather have the bath than the barbecue.

John the Baptist had a large following. The scriptures tell us that many thought it might well be John who was the messiah sent from God to save them from Roman oppression and put them back on top again. But John was busy castigating the people for their own sins and complicity in the impure and unclean world of the Empire. Hence, the need for the holy bath. The people weren't ready for a holy messiah. They were dirty. They needed to get cleaned up. So John set up his corporate offices in the wilderness near the Jordan River. It was there that he met the people, calling them to repent from their own wickedness, pouring water over their dirty bodies in a symbolic cleansing of their dirty souls.

So don't you think it must have been confusing to John when Jesus showed up mingling in those crowds of dirty sinners? When Jesus waded out *with them* into the water? Not to cleanse anybody, you understand, but apparently to take the holy bath *with them*. Why would he need to do that? Why was he wasting time when he could be straightening these people out? What happened to the unquenchable fire? Where's the barbecue?

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We live in volatile times. That much has never completely changed from the time of John and Jesus until now. Take care. As the rhetoric again ratchets up in our national debates, as tempers flare, as suspicions grow, when our temptations are to quick judgments, xenophobia, apathy of faith, and the more base proclivities of our

human nature, or should I say rather our human habits, I like to remember that Jesus wades in the waters of Baptism with us. Hard to separate ourselves from the soil of others when we are all in the same tub. But that's where Jesus is... he wades in the water with us. He forgoes the barbecue for the bath, because there is something about that bath that is more fulfilling, more forgiving, more compassionate than the barbecue ever can be.

Let me tell you a little of what I perceive in baptism... Contrary to some notions of "Original Sin" and the innate depravity which it posits for human nature, I believe that baptism is the way we see the soul for what it is... not depraved by nature, but holy, good, and beating with God's grace. In baptism we do not wash away the ugly parts of the soul of a human being. We acknowledge that we live as the image of God, of the goodness of God, from the desire of God, and nothing, as the Apostle Paul says, can separate us from that love of God we know in Jesus, who was himself baptized. Baptism doesn't do this to us; it shows that it is being done in us.

Oh, but we do like a good roll in the mud sometimes. What once was clean can pick up the dirt and grime of living. We can forget who we are, we can abuse every privilege we have been given, we can do enormous harm. But is it because we are at our core evil? Is that why we are baptized? Because we are evil? Then I have to wonder what Jesus was doing in the Jordan River that day with his cousin John

who spent his days baptizing. Was Jesus evil? No, but he sure was familiar with what evil could do. No, I think we are baptized because we know something of good. We acknowledge we are God's; one time is all that is necessary. We say in baptism that we "...are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own *forever*." We are of God, with God, with each other in the community of God.

Now, when I dirty up, I don't get baptized again and again, but I do come to be with you Sunday by Sunday again and again and again. We come to remember our baptismal birthrights: that we are a people beloved of God, and we have something that we are obliged to share with the world, namely us. I come to ease my soul and find healing in the love of a community and the sharing of Communion. I come to seek the will of God for what I will do next with you and how I can be giving myself for good in this world. In this, you and I are not different; we are baptized with the same baptism. All of us are called to ministry in baptism. You know, baptism doesn't mean that sin won't find us in this world, but it does remind us that sin doesn't own us. We are *cleansed from sin and born again to continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior*.